

Radiohead, 1993: (from left)
Phil Selway, Jonny Greenwood,
Colin Greenwood, Thom Yorke,
Ed O'Brien.



'They're forever
asking: what can
we do differently?'

RADIOHEAD



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The Best Of Radiohead



Q RECOMMENDS

THE EMI YEARS. MY, HOW THEY'VE GROWN.

They must have seen it coming. When Radiohead severed ties with EMI last year and saw the label bought up by a private-equity company, they did not need Mystic Meg to tell them that their back catalogue would be put to work raising some easy cash. EMI, for its part, must know that such a project will only deepen Thom Yorke's frown lines. A band who, *In Rainbows* aside, won't even allow individual songs to be sold on iTunes won't take kindly to seeing their back catalogue broken into pieces and reassembled. It is all rather undignified, as if, after a break-up, one ex-lover were to auction the other's prized possessions on eBay.

But it could have been worse: imagine the travesty that would have resulted if EMI had tried to wrestle Radiohead's slippery oeuvre into a single-disc collection. Instead they let it splurge over two discs, including album tracks and live favourites, alongside what might loosely be called "the hits". There's room for *Planet Telex*, *Idioteque* and *Talk Show Host*; room also for two lesser tracks from *Pablo Honey*, but you can't have everything.

Obviously, this is not aimed at the long-term devotee so let's imagine, a decade hence, a teenager who is intrigued by Radiohead's reputation and picks up this collection retrospectively. To our putative buyer, *Kid A* is as distant as *Creep*. They don't realise that Radiohead started mediocre, redefined arena-rock and then tried to rebuild their sound from the ground up, and the chronology-shirking running order gives them no immediate clues. What would they make of these 29 songs?

The first thing they would notice is that these are, for the most part, pop songs: odd ones, to be sure, but still pop songs, only one of which spills past the six-minute mark. The strangeness of Radiohead's later output is often overstated; they're not interested in brain-frying experimentation. When they venture into the unknown they do so armed with stern self-discipline and an iron grip on melody. No other band in recent years has worked so hard at avoiding the obvious while still delivering hits of pure pleasure.

The defining moment in their early career comes just before the chorus of *Creep*, when Jonny Greenwood sabotages the prettiness of the melody with a stuttering skronk of guitar. At this stage, they were seeking to subvert traditionally structured songs with moments of jarring unease. As their confidence grew, the structures themselves became radical. When *Paranoid Android* gave the world its first taste of *OK Computer* 11 years ago, its segmented architecture was startling but now it just sounds like what Radiohead do. *2+2=5* moves through four distinct phases in half the time. Next to songs that are in constant motion, the likes of *Creep* and *High And Dry*, lovely though they are, seem to be wearing concrete boots.

American music critics have a convention, odd to British readers, of referring to bands in the singular – "Radiohead is" as opposed to "Radiohead are" – but in this case it makes sense. Few bands in the world are such a tight unit. Listen to the way the instruments mesh on *Knives Out* or the marvellous *There There*, ebbing and flowing with almost telepathic sensitivity. It seems inaccurate to call Yorke a frontman when his voice is often just one of several instruments, more notable for its timing and timbre than anything it's saying.

This is where our imaginary listener will notice a shift. The first disc is top-heavy with anthems, and the crystalline clarity of *Karma Police* in no way hints at the opaqueness of *There There*. The catharsis offered by the great flaring chorus of *Lucky* or the exhilarating rush that engulfs *Fake Plastic Trees* has never been revisited.

Whether you regret the loss is a matter of taste but it has liberated Yorke most of all. However elegantly they are phrased, the earlier lyrics are the work of a rock Holden Caulfield, rooting out the bogus and wielding his sarcasm a little too bluntly. Moving towards an allusive mosaic of figures of speech, desolate imagery, wails and sighs, he gets closer to the heart of his perennial subject: an amorphous sense of bewilderment and disappointment with the modern world. There is no longer room in Radiohead's music for grand declarations or the promise of resolution, and this understatement enriches rather than impoverishes their music. Long after *Just* has given up its secrets, *Pyramid Song* still has pockets of mystery deserving investigation.

If the first disc highlights the rupture, especially when *Fake Plastic Trees* gives way to the freeze-dried funk of *Idioteque*, then the jumbled chronology pays dividends on the second, where the more oblique tracks from *OK Computer* sit comfortably alongside this decade's most forthcoming moments, the differences less apparent than the shared vocabulary.

But then it's *Pablo Honey's* *You and Anyone Can Play Guitar*, and our curious teenager might be wondering where the grace and intrigue went all of a sudden. The latter, with its thumping irony ("I wanna be Jim Morrison") and pedestrian rock moves, is welcome only as a reminder of how far Radiohead have travelled.

Most greatest hits albums end with failure because they tend to appear when the creative engines are running down. But the only duds here are the oldest songs, and *In Rainbows* marks a breathtakingly confident start to the post-EMI years. Some people grumble that Radiohead are over-praised, but our future listener will be able to spend weeks unpacking the multifarious pleasures contained on these two discs and perhaps wondering why more bands don't demand so much of themselves, forever asking: what can we do differently? ■ DORIAN LYNSEY

INFO

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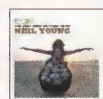
Paranoid Android
No Surprises
There There
Fake Plastic Trees
Pyramid Song
Everything In Its Right Place

LABEL: Parlophone

RELEASE DATE:

2 June

FURTHER INFO:
radiohead.com



NEIL YOUNG

Decade [REPRISE, 1977] ★★★★★

A roomy, authoritative retrospective released when there was still plenty of fuel in Young's songwriting tank. Radiohead have been known to cover *Cinnamon Girl* live.



PINK FLOYD

Echoes: The Best Of Pink Floyd [EMI, 2001] ★★★★★

Radiohead's most obvious antecedents – epic anxiety, gnomic lyrics, few obvious singles – flaunt their diversity across three decades and two discs.